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## Using a Learning Community at an HBCU to Influence Health and Wellness

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## Using a Learning Community at an HBCU to Influence Health and Wellness

### Abstract

This perspective article discusses how a health-related learning community was incorporated to help freshman students learn about health and wellness and prevent weight gain at an HBCU. Freshman students often gain weight during their first year away from home. These students make poor diet and exercise choices during their transition to college which can cause future health concerns. A health-related learning community, LIVE WELL, was established to teach health, nutrition, and wellness strategies. LIVE WELL also included self-care, future career exploration, service-learning/civic engagement, and lifetime learning experiences. Valuable lessons were learned from the faculty members who managed LIVE WELL. Challenges were presented to the faculty members who integrated solutions into the learning community. Integrating positive health changes to freshman students' lifestyles needs to be a priority and needs further exploration.

### Keywords

health-related learning community, HBCU, overweight and obesity

Norfolk State University (NSU) grew out of a demand for providing a setting in which the youth of the region could give expressions to their hopes and aspirations during the Great Depression. In 1935, it was named Norfolk State College and 44 years later, university status was attained. Today, NSU is one of the country's largest predominantly historic black colleges and universities (HBCU) in the nation. It is committed to pursuing its vital role of serving the people of Hampton Roads. Greater than one-third of the student population are first generation college students, and a large percent of students receive financial aid (Ericksen et al., 2015). Annual enrollment is over 5,000 students and approximately 2,000 students live in on-campus residential halls.

Life-changing transitions occur when young adults graduate from high school and begin college (Sogari et al., 2018). The transition from high school to college is represented by students leaving home for their first time, a new environment, making new friendships and social connections, and independence in decision making (Whisner et al., 2018). College students tend to have more of a weight gain than those who do not attend college. Most undergraduate college students consume their meals at the university dining facilities that do not offer many healthy food choices (Abraham et al., 2018). Overweight and obesity rates have significantly increased over the last decades and are an epidemic in the United States. Food choices and physical activity are crucial factors related to weight gain during college.

This article presents a perspective on how wellness, nutrition, and health promotion are incorporated in a freshman learning community at a HBCU. The focus of the learning community was to provide knowledge on obesity, weight gain, and teach lifelong wellness practices for students during their first year at college. The transition from high school to college is an important time and a weight gain is common, making it an essential time for prevention and intervention (Whisner et al., 2018). Incorporating wellness activities for freshman students provides students with the knowledge and resources necessary to avert a weight gain and prevent chronic illnesses in the future. Learning communities are intentional communities where students can extend their academic experience from the classroom to their personal life as they engage with other students in similar curricular and co-curricular activities (Inkelas et al., 2006; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Schein, 2005). This learning community provided students with an option and support for choosing to participate in health-related activities during their first year away at college.

## **Current Health Challenges**

### **Overweight and Obesity**

In the United States, approximately 69% of adults 20 years and older are considered obese. According to the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) data 12.7 million children and adolescents 2-19 years of age are obese. Obesity rates also vary among race/ethnic groups, and statistically significant differences in obesity trends emerged between non-Hispanic black women and Hispanic women. According to the American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment ACHA-NCHA survey, the prevalence of overweight/obesity among college students aged 19-24 has increased from 31.9% 2008 to 40.8% in 2015. The results also suggested that the trend of increasing disparity in obesity is continuing, and that lower-income adolescents are at risk for adulthood obesity and related comorbidities such as type 2 diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, and stroke.

Obesity and overweight rates are a public health concern in the United States. Obesity prevalence in the United States is substantially higher in racial/ethnic minorities compared to white population (Kumanyika, 2017). Health consequences related to obesity are associated with diet and physical activity habits (Kumanyika, 2017). Many communities are not in an environment that encourages healthy foods and daily physical activities. A healthy diet and regular exercise can lower many chronic illnesses that individuals face (CDC, 2021). The estimated medical costs associated with obesity are \$147 billion (CDC, 2021). Plus, overweight college students are likely to become overweight or obese adults and are at a significant risk for diet related chronic illnesses such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, hypertension, and some cancers (Abraham et al., 2018).

### **Physical activity**

Physical activity is a modifiable factor related to obesity. Unfortunately, physical activity is often overlooked among college students as students report not having enough time for physical activity. Reasons for weight gain during the first-year of college were due to changes in the social and physical environments including dietary intake, alcohol use, physical activity, stress, and sleep (Abraham et al., 2018). Freshman have reported that the transition to college makes it challenging to maintain health and physical activity due to lack of motivation, loss of routine, and few opportunities for organized sports participation (Whisner et al., 2018). This results in college students gaining weight during their freshman year and this continues each year (Abraham et al., 2018). Researchers found that students who attend college gain between four to nine pounds in their first two years of college (Abraham et al., 2018). Plus, decreases in physical activity are related to changes in body composition, including increased fat mass and a decrease in lean body mass (Whisner et al., 2018).

### **Diet**

The typical American diet is associated with an elevated risk of chronic illnesses. The typical American diet is one that is highly refined with considerable amounts of animal protein, low in dietary fiber, high in total and saturated fats, and simple sugars. It is low in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains as these foods contain phytochemicals and dietary fiber (Conlon & Bird, 2015). Consuming too many calories and adapting to a sedentary lifestyle results in weight gain that can lead to overweight/obesity as well as chronic illnesses. College students frequently report eating their meals at all you can eat dining facilities. They also report snacking, eating junk food, and dieting. These behaviors are related to weight gain. College students frequently consume high calorie, nutrient-poor foods such as sodas, fried foods, and salty foods and these foods replace nutrient-rich foods such as fruits, vegetables, and whole grains (Whisner et al., 2018).

## **Assessment of Need**

### **Virginia**

The state of Virginia reports that 36.3% of adults were overweight in 2020 and 28.5% adults were obese (CDC, 2021). Adolescents who are overweight in 2020 were 14.7% and 12% were obese (CDC, 2021). One out of three children in the United States were found to be obese

or overweight. Childhood obesity can lead to serious, lifelong, and life-threatening health problems such as Type 2 diabetes and heart disease, problems that were once only seen in adult populations. Experts fear that due to the obesity epidemic, this may be the first generation of children to have shorter life expectancies than their parents (VFHY, 2019).

In Virginia, 28 percent of high school students are obese or overweight. Virginia currently ranks 36<sup>th</sup> in the nation for childhood obesity in 10-to 17-year-olds, however, Virginia is 28<sup>th</sup> in the nation for high school obesity. Obesity prevalence among high school students in Virginia is 12.7 percent, lower than the national rate of 14.8 percent. Among adults, Virginia ranks 28<sup>th</sup> in the nation for obesity, with about one out of three adults (30.4 percent) considered obese.

## **Learning Communities**

### **Learning Communities at NSU**

Learning communities have been found to impact student success (Otto et al., 2015). Freshman retention rates were declining at NSU and one approach to boost retention rates was to add learning communities. Learning communities combine curricular and co-curricular activities inside and outside of the classroom to allow students to fully engage in their college experience and to participate in experiences away from the classroom (NSU, n.d.).

NSU additionally developed learning communities to instill a culture of critical thinking among its students and to increase graduation rates (Eriksen et al., 2015). Students take one class together each semester and participate in activities throughout the year based on common interests or majors (NSU, n.d.).

### **Description of the LIVE WELL Strategies**

LIVE WELL was developed in 2014 as one of fourteen learning communities at Norfolk State University, and the purpose was to help freshman form connections between health, nutrition, and wellness. Negative health outcomes have been reported during students' first year in college (Lederer et al., 2020). LIVE WELL was intended to help freshman avoid gaining weight during their first year away in college and learn about self-care, future careers, service learning/civic engagement, physical activity, and lifetime learning experiences. The physical activity events that were selected for LIVE WELL students were based on workouts that were not the usual types of exercises so students could engage socially while adding physical activity to their schedule. The students were also required to take two to three weekly exercise classes at the NSU Spartan Training Zone. Students could also select to cross train or walk around the track for 40 minutes. The exercise classes could be Zumba, yoga, Pilates, etc. Plus, the students learned and participated in exercises that they could do in their residence halls whenever speakers came to campus who were personal trainers.

College students can decide if they are going to consume healthy food options or unhealthy food options for their meals (Abraham et al., 2018). The unhealthy food options established during students' college years may continue throughout adulthood (Whisner et al., 2018). To offer students knowledge regarding diet and health, students took a Personal and Community Health class during the fall semester and a nutrition class in the spring semester. The faculty member who taught the Personal and Community Health class is a Master Certified Health Education Specialist and has over 20 years of experience as a college health professional. The faculty member who taught the Science of Human Nutrition class is a Registered Dietitian

Nutritionist with over 18 years of experience as the undergraduate food science and nutrition program director. These courses were general education courses offered at NSU. Interested freshman applied to join a learning community when filling out their housing application.

LIVE WELL events are planned by the faculty members who both have significant interests in health and wellness and teach the classes each semester. The faculty members who formed LIVE WELL benefited from the various partnerships that were formed for all learning communities. LIVE WELL partners included housing, student affairs, academic affairs, the on-campus food service company, and transportation. Activities include non-typical exercises, lifetime learning experiences, and community service events. Service-learning is also used to increase student motivation, enhance knowledge, and improve learning outcomes (Rosenkranz, 2012). Examples of LIVE WELL activities include cooking classes, rock climbing at local gym, boxing classes, visiting a local organic farm and picking organic strawberries, career exploration speaker events, providing health and wellness information at health fairs, and bringing local registered dietitians and sports trainers to campus to discuss healthy food options and have students participate in various exercises. LIVE WELL also made Thanksgiving food baskets that were given out to residents in the local community.

### **LIVE WELL Intended Impact**

The strategies used to select LIVE WELL activities are based on providing students skills that will be beneficial for their foreseeable future. The strategies also focused on trying to provide solutions to prevent weight gain during students' first year away at college. They can also be used after their first year and once students graduate college. Events were selected based on if they provide lifelong learning skills, career exploration opportunities, and exercise and alternative exercise opportunities. Lifelong learning skills include having students take basic cooking classes at the local culinary school, learning how to make healthy breakfast foods and snacks in the food science and nutrition kitchen lab, and visiting a local organic farm to see first-hand how fruits and vegetables are grown each season.

Career exploration opportunities included having former alumni come to campus to speak to the students about their major in undergraduate school and the path they took to become a full-time employee. It included having a sports dietitian and a personal trainer discuss what they majored in, organizations that they joined as students, volunteer work that they did, professional organizations that they are involved in currently, and all that it took to get to where they are now. Exercise and alternative exercises included bringing in a local registered dietitian who owns gyms in the area to have students participate in exercises that they could do in their residence halls as well as hear about his career path. Exercise and alternative exercise include having students take classes at the rock gym and boxing class. These activities were fun activities that students could participate in together as a group that were not offered at the gym on campus.

### **Evaluation Methods for LIVE WELL**

Evaluation methods were put in place for LIVE WELL students to determine program success. Program goals included having eighty percent of students reflect on their personal health habits as measured in their written journals, eighty percent of students participated in physical activity through planned weekly exercise sessions, Eighty percent of students in LIVE WELL exhibiting higher post-test scores by participating in cooking classes, and seventy percent of students showing a decrease or no change in weight measured by total body weight.

## **Results for LIVE WELL**

Results found that LIVE WELL students reached two of the four program goals. All students reflected on their personal health habits in their journals. The students learned new information about having a healthy routine. And, eighty-two percent of students in LIVE WELL maintained or decreased their total body weight as measured by pre/post weights using a digital scale.

## **Input from Students**

Comments from students were positive overall. Most students indicated that their favorite activities were going to the rock gym and boxing classes. Students did not like vegetarian food options when food was offered after activities. And they mentioned that some of the event times conflicted with other classes.

## **Challenges**

LIVE WELL students did not regularly attend the weekly exercise classes at the NSU Spartan Training Zone. Cross training and walking around the track were also activities that they could select, but students did not choose to do those either. Students were to get their LIVE WELL weekly activity sheet signed by training zone instructors to show that they did the workouts. Even when offering extra credit, attendance was still low. Students participated in those activities that we planned and transported them to, but they did not engage in self motivating exercise activities. Students seemed to enjoy the physical activities that were just with the LIVE WELL group and those with the general student population.

## **Lessons Learned and Next Steps**

The faculty members who taught both courses quickly learned valuable lessons related to student attendance when implementing LIVE WELL. One significant lesson was to always have a healthful food or snack and water available for the students when activities occurred. The faculty members found that having food available resulted in nearly perfect attendance at events. Providing students with transportation to and from the activities was also important for successful attendance. Students enjoyed going to dinner together after an activity before going back to campus. This allowed for extra fellowship between the LIVE WELL group. Another valuable lesson that the faculty members learned was not scheduling activities early in the morning, especially over the weekend. Scheduling an activity early in the morning resulted in poor attendance.

Going forward, the LIVE WELL faculty members will need to be more rigorous about evaluation of the activities to ensure that the activities were enjoyable for the students and aligned with the LIVE WELL goals. The faculty members will also need to continue collecting students' weights during the fall semester and then again in the spring to determine if students are gaining, losing, or maintaining weight. The faculty members will also need to collect exercise attendance sheets weekly instead of twice each semester and hold students accountable by grading the exercise sheets. Current activities will need to be reevaluated to make sure that they are still popular and fit the LIVE WELL strategies. And, students will need to indicate at the

beginning of each semester their best days and times that they are available to find when it's convenient to schedule activities.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the many challenges LIVE WELL has faced over the years with getting students accustomed to the opportunities of making positive changes to health outcomes, there is still the possibility to have positive lessons. The potential for dynamic change in student lifestyles is yet to be fully explored and evaluated. More research needs to be conducted to evaluate lifelong wellness practices of freshman students in the learning community. We must take the time to re-evaluate LIVE WELL with student input and embrace changes that can be made for the best health outcomes.



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